



Cleaning Up City Hall

By Carl DeMaio

Throughout the last 18 months of campaigning in my own race and for other city candidates, I had a chance to hear the hopes and frustrations of countless San Diegans on the issues facing our city. Across the socio-economic and political spectrum of our diverse city, people expressed a strong desire for fundamental change in our city government.

Previous city leaders engaged in bitter infighting, denied the pressing problems facing the city, broke the public trust, and left the public treasury bone dry. Disgusted with the situation, the public has chosen a new City Council and City Attorney to work with Mayor Sanders to clean the mess up.

If we are to succeed in bringing positive change to our city government, city leaders must put aside political differences and personal infighting and work cooperatively together. We must articulate and commit to a comprehensive plan for restoring the city's financial health and regaining public trust. Such a plan should address four top priorities.

1. Balance the Budget: After decades of running a structural deficit, the city must balance its budget for real without accounting gimmicks or raiding our reserves. This will require that we live within our means and address the biggest cost driver in the city's budget: labor costs. The new City Council must finish the job of pension reform, implement voter-mandated managed competition efficiency reforms, and trim city salaries and benefits to sustainable levels.

Unfortunately, the city's powerful labor unions—who wield significant influence on the new City Council—would rather see seven libraries closed than agree to a simple one week employee furlough like other cities have. The unions would rather see road repairs cancelled than ask city workers to pay their fair share for pension service credits they bought at a steep discount and in violation of the municipal code.

Service cuts and higher fees are not the way to balance the budget. Because the old City Council was unwilling to take on the labor unions and reform excessive labor perks, San Diego taxpayers paid more and got less from their city government. The public deserves better leadership from the new City Council on the city's budget.

2. Rebuild Community Infrastructure: San Diegans should be proud of the physical condition of their neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the city has allowed its core community infrastructure—streets, sidewalks, water pipes, and public safety facilities—to decay.

Instead of diverting scarce infrastructure dollars to lavish projects such as a \$743 million new City Hall, we must make core community infrastructure the top priority and fund it first before any other projects.

In addition to setting better priorities, we need to improve how infrastructure dollars are spent through improved oversight, performance audits, and holding employees and contractors accountable for quality, cost, and schedule targets. Without these reforms, San Diegans risk paying more and getting less in infrastructure.

3. Open and Honest Government: The special interests—both big labor and big business—still have too much influence on city decisions. We must commit to putting the public interest first, rather than bowing to pressure of political power brokers. That’s why we must enact real campaign finance reform, provide the public with greater access to government information and decision making processes, and pass comprehensive lobbying reform and post all elected officials’ calendars online.

4. Jobs-Friendly Climate: We already have the best weather in the nation, how about creating the best jobs climate to go along with it? At a time when the economy is struggling, City Hall should be cutting red-tape, working with schools and employers on workforce development, investing in economic infrastructure such as the convention center expansion, and forging public-private partnerships to keep jobs in our region. More importantly, the city should not add to the financial struggles of working families by imposing higher taxes and fees.

Cleaning up the mess at City Hall won’t be easy. Yet with hard work—and a commitment to work cooperatively together in the public interest—we can create a city government San Diegans can be proud of again. I’m ready—the public is certainly ready—and soon we shall see if the new City Council is ready.

Carl DeMaio will take office tomorrow as a City Councilmember representing District 5.